

VZCZCXYZ0017
RR RUEHWEB

DE RUEHZP #0014/01 0041621
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
R 041621Z JAN 08
FM AMEMBASSY PANAMA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 1605
INFO RUEHZA/WHA CENTRAL AMERICAN COLLECTIVE
RUEHBO/AMEMBASSY BOGOTA 2648
RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS 1157
RUEHBU/AMEMBASSY BUENOS AIRES 0205
RHMFSS/CDR USSOUTHCOM MIAMI FL
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC
RHMFSS/JOINT STAFF WASHINGTON DC
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHDC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC
RUEHUB/USINT HAVANA 0087
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 0306

C O N F I D E N T I A L PANAMA 000014

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/03/2018

TAGS: PREL PGOV UNSC VE CU PM

SUBJECT: PANAMA: FIRST VP AND FM SAMUEL LEWIS' FIRST 2008
MEETING WITH AMBASSADOR

REF: 2007 STATE 170857 AGREEMENT CHANNEL

Classified By: Ambassador William A. Eaton. Reasons: 1.4
(b) and (d).

Summary

¶1. (C) Panamanian First VP and FM Samuel Lewis touched up:

-- President Martin Torrijos' impending trip to Cuba and
perceived Cuba-Venezuela tensions; -- his exasperation at
Chavez's ability to rise like a phoenix;
-- his February travel to New York during Panama's UNSC
Presidency; and
-- Torrijos' continuing clashes with PMG over internal party
elections, Supreme Court magistrate nominees, and the budget

during his January 2 meeting with Ambassador. (Note:
Ambassador presented reftel demarche and diplomatic note
during this meeting. (SEPTEL)) End Summary.

Torrijos to Cuba

¶2. (C) "In the next week or two" Torrijos would be traveling
to Cuba to accompany his daughter for medical exams, Lewis
informed Ambassador. "Of course, he will have to meet with
Cuban officials while he is there." Lewis added that
Torrijos would try to secure appointments with Raul Castro
and others to get "a first-hand feel of the mood and emerging
politics."

¶3. (C) "It's clear that Raul and Chavez have very strained
relations," Lewis asserted, reflecting on his last trip to
Cuba a couple of months ago. While Chavez and Castro
obviously had a very close relationship, in Chavez's mind
Chavez came next after Castro in the "pecking order,"
something that did not endear Chavez to Raul or to Raul's
camp followers. Lewis asserted that friction between Cuba
and Venezuela was evident in a number of conversations that
he had with a broad range of Cuba officials. Lewis promised
that he would provide a read-out of Torrijos' upcoming visit.

The Phoenix-like Chavez

¶4. (C) Noting that Chavez was "bloodied" after his failed referendum, Lewis expressed his frustration and bewilderment about the sudden turn of events "in favor of Chavez" with respect to his efforts to broker the release of FARC hostages. The discovery and arrest of "Chavez's agents" delivering bags of money to Argentina should have been a blow to Chavez as well. ("I am still scratching my head about (Argentine President) Cristina Fernandez's reaction to the arrests in Miami," Lewis added. "She should have taken the high road and expressed or feigned horror that a foreigner might try to subvert the election. Instead, she basically admitted that she too was culpable.") Now, with the prospect of the release of FARC hostages, Chavez had risen once again like a phoenix and seemed to be successfully painting Colombian President Uribe as the bad guy, Lewis explained. Lewis said that he worried even more about the safety of the hostages; "The FARC could simply kill them and blame their deaths on 'military operations' conducted by Colombian government forces. Uribe must be regretting that he ever opened the door to Chavez on the hostage issue." Lewis said that Torrijos and other regional leaders had been calling Uribe to give him moral support. Ambassador responded that, more than private calls, Uribe would probably appreciate even more public statements of support; Lewis demurred.

Lewis to be in NY for Panama's UNSC Presidency

¶5. (C) "I plan to spend about two weeks in New York City during Panama's Security Council Presidency," Lewis said.

Additionally, Lewis said that he would bring his family along so that he could combine business with pleasure. (Note: Panamanian schools have their summer break from January to March.) Lewis provided no insights into any specific proposals that Panama might try to advance during its UNSC Presidency.

PMG: Clashes with Torrijos Continue

¶6. (C) Venting at length that National Assembly President Pedro Miguel Gonzalez (PMG) was damaging Panama, the governing Revolutionary Democratic Party (PRD), President Torrijos, Lewis said that relations between PMG and Torrijos were frosty. (Note: PMG remains under federal indictment in connection with the 1992 murder of a U.S. serviceman and the attempted murder of another.) For example, before entering the main hall for January 2 swearing-in ceremony for the Supreme Court's new president and two new magistrates, PMG and Torrijos were held in small anteroom. "They did not exchange a single word or even make eye contact for over ten minutes," Lewis said Torrijos later told him.

¶7. (C) Concerning the various races for seats on the PRD's National Executive Committee (CEN), Lewis said that PMG was constantly shifting his focus from one seat to another keeping current occupants and contenders on edge. Currently, PMG was toying with the idea of running against Panama City Mayor and First CEN Sub-Secretary Juan Carlos Navarro. "Juan Carlos will win that seat easily," Lewis asserted regarding his cousin. Shifting his target from one seat to the next though ultimately worked to PMG's advantage in terms of advancing his desire to secure greater power and leadership in Panama and within the PRD, Lewis said. Asked by Ambassador whether PMG would be re-elected National Assembly President, Lewis emphatically said, "No! That will never happen. He has burned too many bridges. The President has the votes -- and Pedro Miguel knows it -- to prevent his re-election."

¶8. (C) PMG had recently lost two battles in the National

Assembly. Lewis confirmed that PMG had wanted one of his cronies to get one of the Supreme Court magistrate seats. Torrijos, however, worked behind the scenes to rally votes in favor of Oyden Ortega and Jeronimo Mejia who were eventually elected. When PMG started counting noses, Lewis said, PMG realized that he did not have the votes for his candidate and so abandoned him. Turning to the budget, PMG tried to hold up approval of Torrijos' budget pending reinstatement of funds to be managed by individual deputies for projects in their districts (partidas circuitales) as well as the inclusion of a number of pet projects. Torrijos, Lewis said, called PMG's bluff, met with individual deputies, and told those deputies that failure to approve his budget would mean that funds for projects in their districts would dry up. Torrijos was happy to operate at the 2007 budget levels, but made it clear that he would make up funding gaps for his high priority projects by taking funds intended for the districts of those deputies who voted against his budget. "Torrijos told the deputies that he would make it crystal clear who was responsible for roads not being paved in various deputies' districts," Lewis said. "The deputies quickly got into line and pushed PMG to approve Torrijos' budget."

Summary

19. (C) Lewis' portal of Torrijos' reluctant need to see Cuban officials when he visits Cuba for medical treatment for his daughter was undercut by his statement that Torrijos would be seeking out an appointment with Raul Castro. His discussion of Cuba-Venezuela tensions is really nothing new, but provides a fig leaf that Panama can serve as an interlocutor with major players in the hemisphere. Ditto on his discussion of Chavez, Fernandez, and Uribe -- no real substance, but no real desire to move beyond private engagement to public statements. Hopefully, Lewis' lack of a clear idea of what Panama wants to do in the UNSC during its presidency means that Panama's month at the helm of the Council will be uneventful, perhaps even one without a time consuming, but ultimately resultless, thematic debate. As concerns PMG, by all reports, whatever relationship PMG and Torrijos may have had at one time is now in tatters. Torrijos is now having to spend more time and energy on legislative matters, but he is also prevailing on his top legislative priorities. His victories in the National Assembly, however, do come at the political cost of twisting PRD deputies' arms at a time when the PRD internal election process is just warming up. Most interesting perhaps, if unsaid, is that it looks like Lewis has shelved his plans for a presidential run: there was no mention of his presidential campaign, and he plans to be in New York during the peak of the internal PRD political season.

EATON